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ABSTRACT

A plan for freshman-level composition which includes students at different achievement levels would make the developmental student an integral part of the college, and eliminate the humiliation of being branded "remedial." All students would participate in the class, write the same essays, and read the same material; however, students would be graded on a contract addressed to their individual needs. Entrance tests, which would include a writing sample, would aid the student in identifying his weaknesses and strengths in the areas of writing, reading, grammar, and spelling. In addition to the basic class, students would take special labs in their areas of weakness. Programmed materials designed for use in a lab are available in all four areas, and computer-based education programs are becoming widespread. The lab teachers would keep in communication with the classroom teachers, and vice-versa, sending reports on progress at least once a week. In class, no distinctions besides grading would be made concerning a student's ability. The class would focus on four things: expository writing, meaningful readings, discussion, and reading one another's papers. The student's contract would spell out exactly what would be expected of him in each lab and in the classroom. (Author/NHM)

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SEPARATION AND DEVELOPMENTAL ENGLISH

by

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Submitted to

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ED 603

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Separation and

Developmental English

by

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Community college English teachers today face a crisis in their work. After years of tremendous growth, the colleges and teachers are now having to test their philosophical commitment to developmental students--because the students are coming into the colleges in greater numbers, but with less proficiency in writing, each year. The first section of this paper discusses the seemingly conclusive evidence that these students are less proficient in language arts than those of a few years ago. The second section reexamines the commitment of the community college to developmental English and concludes that the language arts crisis must be viewed as a tremendous opportunity rather than as a distasteful social problem. The third section argues that the needs of the developmental students are not best served by segregation into special sections, but by individualized developmental labs supplementing a small composition class made up of students of varying proficiencies. Too often the developmental student's self-image is damaged by segregation, and they feel that they are, and will continue to be, low achievers.

Before continuing, I want to make it clear that the term "remedial" is damaging and should be discarded. "To remedy," according to all dictionaries and to most people's common sense, means "to cure." But students who lack basic skills are in no way sick or mentally ill,

and they should not be referred to with such notions. Also, community college English teachers also use the term "high-risk" when discussing developmental students. "High-risk" is an important concept in selling insurance--but not in teaching. The word "developmental" is much more appropriate. Development is growth and expansion, so this term is much more appropriate to teachers. Importantly, this is not just an exercise in euphemism; this is fundamental to the mistakes community college English teachers too often make--primarily, segregating students into classes which seem to almost all observers to be "normal" and "abnormal."

The Crisis in Language Arts

If English teachers in the two-year college are to view the increasing numbers of unprepared students as an opportunity, they must first understand the current crisis in the language arts. The general public, and probably many teachers, view the current situation with distaste. But rather than shrink before the challenge, we should understand what it really means. I will discuss the crisis by presenting three reports released in the fall of 1975: the decline in the verbal scores of the Scholastic Aptitude Tests, the new report on functional illiteracy in America, and the writing studies of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). While these reports are certainly of great concern to English teachers at the two-year college, they by no means present an insurmountable problem.

Early in the fall, newspapers throughout the country carried the seemingly disastrous news that SAT verbal usage scores declined in the

last year from 444 to 434.[1] Certainly, there is an observable decline, but it is only ten points--just over one percent of the eight hundred possible on that section. Such a small decline really means very little. Furthermore, this reduction may mean that more unprepared students--who would not have taken the SAT in the past--are taking the test because interest in higher education is growing among students who need to develop their language arts skills. Therefore, the crisis might actually be a very good thing.

A few weeks later the news media reported the shocking lack of functional literacy in America. Time said one adult in five is functionally illiterate;[2] that is, they do not have the ability to perform necessary functions such as reading labels, job notices, road signs, or the phone book. Furthermore, functional illiteracy is more than twice as common among blacks as whites. Though this report is stunning, it actually tells us some good things. First, we now know better than any society in history exactly how literate our country is and who the illiterate are. Second, since functional illiteracy has never before been tested, we have no reason to suppose that national literacy has deteriorated. Third, perhaps now government at all levels will address developmental reading with more adequate funding. More research and curriculum development is sorely needed,[3] and by rising to this challenge the community college can more thoroughly convince the community of its value. Millions of adult Americans need help from higher education; the community college can and must meet their needs.

The final bombshell is the National Assessment of Educational Progress report that says the quality of high school graduates' writing is deteriorating. The nation's news media has widely reported this story also.[4] Between 1969 and 1973 (when the writing samples were taken) the writing of nine-year-olds remained constant; however, among 13- and 17-year-olds, an ominous change has taken place. If we were to divide these writers into three groups--unproficient, proficient, and exceptionally proficient--we would find that the middle group is dropping out and that the upper group is remaining stable; in other words, a wider schism has developed. We can conclude that the number of unproficient writers entering the community college will continue to increase.

Because of these reports millions of people are aware of the language arts crisis and, hopefully, are more concerned with the quality of education at all levels. Community college English teachers now have a greater opportunity to help millions of unprepared adults learn the skills necessary to living a productive and satisfying life. But will English teachers do it? In the past their failure has been phenomenal, and the open door has become a revolving door to millions of developmental students. Importantly, none of these reports can state that the students' capacity to learn has decreased. So the problem, dear teachers, is not in our students but in ourselves.

Separation and the Philosophical Commitment

In Blind Man on a Freeway, William Moore, Jr., writes, "High-risk students test the commitment of those who claim to be interested in them.[5]

And when a failure in results is great, we can assume that the commitment is low. In Against the Odds, Moore writes, "The dropout rate of low achievers in the open-door college continues to increase, while the number of these students who get into the regular college (as opposed to the remedial program) continues to decrease."[6] John E. Roueche, in Salvage, Redirection, or Custody?, agrees:

> A recent investigation found that from 40 to 60 per cent of the students enrolled in remedial English classes in California public junior colleges earned a grade of D or F. Only 20 per cent of the students enrolled in these remedial courses later enrolled in credit college courses.[7]

Terry O'Banion, in Teachers for Tomorrow, also cites the California study and goes on to insist that "success in these programs has been almost non-existent" and that "the purpose, the curriculum, and the learning strategies probably need complete redevelopment."[8] Therefore, the test of commitment has been failed because no success can be claimed when, as Roueche points out, "as many as 75 per cent of low-achieving students withdraw from college the first year."[9]

So what exactly is the philosophical commitment of the community college English teacher to the developmental student, and how important is it? James W. Thornton, in The Community Junior College, argues, "a democratic society cannot wholesomely function without a well-educated citizenry."[10] It follows that "many of the young people who cannot meet the restrictive admission standards of some four-year colleges are precisely the ones who most need further education."[11] English teachers

fail in their philosophical commitment when they segregate students according to their previous academic achievement. When this happens, these students who most need further education are denied an equal chance. Teachers usually shun such courses, as Roueche points out in A Modest Proposal: Students Can Learn, because "teaching remedial or developmental courses does not identify the instructor with higher academia."[12] Such an attitude is understandable (though certainly not commendable) because the teacher feels like he has a high school class, and the students feel the same way. When this segregation occurs, the equality to which teachers should be dedicated drops out of the community college, and the developmental student is allowed to fall far short of his goals.

This lack of philosophical commitment and the failure of most developmental English programs is inherent in the structure of the program because it fails to be an integral part of the college and it humiliates the student. In Against the Odds, Moore writes:

> Although it is true that more than 200 community colleges can identify some compensatory or remedial courses being taught, it is difficult to locate a significant number which have developmental or remedial departments as an integral part of the college.[13]

When a student is not an integral part of the college, three destructive things happen. First, the quality of his courses suffer. The fact of a course's irrelevance cannot be concealed; it affects both student motivation and teaching quality. Second, the segregation creates two sets of goals: one for the "normal" classes and one for the "abnormal."

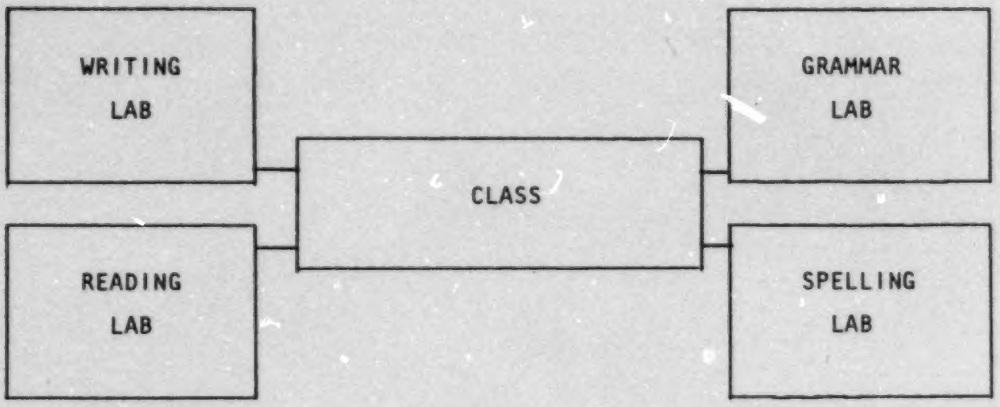
All students should be able to see themselves in a viable program, but developmental students too often cannot. Third, humiliation, which Moore discusses,[14] destroys whatever motivation a student might have. Developmental students are made to feel stupid or second-class when separated from the college, so they drop out feeling that they have no place in college. This segregation results directly from a misinterpretation of entrance tests. These tests, according to Roueche, do not measure a student's capacity for learning and they do not measure success.[15] Therefore, they should not be used to separate students into groups; rather, they should be used to help define a person's educational needs as an individual. This misinterpretation of testing must stop, and all students must be made integral parts of the college.

A New Plan for Freshman-level Composition

The most important step in making all students an integral part of the college is to break down the walls between them. This means assimilating regular and developmental sections. I am not arguing that developmental programs be junked--unprepared students need the individualized attention that the successful developmental programs provide. There is, however, no need for separate classes. I am proposing that each freshman English class include students with different levels of academic achievement and each student would be graded on a contract addressing his individual needs. Such a program

would make the developmental student an integral part of the college and eliminate the humiliation of being branded "remedial." This can be done very easily due to the inherent flexibility of freshman English.

The following diagram represents how such a section would look to the developmental student:



All students would participate in the class, write the same essays, and read the same material; however, not all students would be expected to write at the same level. Here, entrance tests (if properly designed) are important. After the testing, which should involve a writing sample, a student is shown what his weaknesses and strengths are, and with the help of his teacher and counsellor he draws up his contract for the course. If he is weak in all four areas, the student would take all four labs in addition to the class (this student should probably take only one or two other courses). A student writing exceptionally well would not be required to take any of the labs. Again, everything would be individualized and paced according to the student's contract, including the grading in the class.

In class, no distinctions besides grading would be made concerning a person's ability--everyone would be treated as an equal. The class would focus on four different things: expository writing, meaningful readings, discussion, and reading each other's papers. Since several composition texts are designed to help students of widely varying abilities,[16] all the students could benefit from the same text. Second, the readings assigned (whether a book or a series of articles or stories) should be meaningful to the students. In Blind Man on a Freeway, Moore points out that when students are given relevant materials to read, their appetites for reading are increased substantially.[17] Third, class discussions are very valuable. Here, students learn from their peers and begin to see the importance of logical development, clarity, being well-informed. Finally, students also learn from their peers when they share papers. Such an approach makes the student more aware of style, clarity and logic in expository writing, and more sensitive to the ideas of others. All the students would benefit from this integrated approach--no one is either above or below this kind of experience.

The class would be supplemented by individual labs which, if properly staffed and equipped, are, according to Moore's research, often successful in helping developmental students.[18] The initial testing determines which labs the student needs, where he needs to begin in each area, and what point he may be expected to reach--this information determines a student's contract. Programmed materials

designed for use in a lab are available in all these areas,[19] and computer-based education programs are becoming widespread. Lab proctors, working with professional English teachers, guide the students through their programs which should, according to Roueche, involve modular testing and non-punitive grading.[20] The lab teachers must keep in communication with the classroom teachers, and vice-versa, sending reports on progress at least once a week. These labs should also be open to students not required to be there. If these labs are adequately equipped and staffed, the elementary language arts could be picked up--though progress would be slow in some cases--and then applied in the class. If the labs are understaffed and ill-equipped, they would be, for most, a waste of time.

The student's contract must spell out exactly what is expected of him in each lab and in the classroom. The same classroom assignments must be made of everyone, but they need not be graded on the same level. In fact, if the pre-testing indicates that he cannot be expected to pass the course, he would have the option of taking the class under a different course number. For example, most students would be enrolled for English 101, but some would be enrolled for English 100, which would count something toward a degree or certificate but would not replace English 101 (except when a teacher decides the student is adequately proficient in writing and logical communication). Since different classroom reachers would assign different books, a student could take the class several times without boring duplication and with constant development.

In Catching Up: Remedial Education, Roueche presents eleven recommendations for developmental English programs; this system implements all but one. Roueche writes, "A separately organized division of developmental studies should be created with its own staff and administrative head."[21] He proposes this because students not equipped for traditional courses would probably fail. I agree with him only in part--developmental students should not be expected to compete with traditional students, but under this system they wouldn't. The contract system of grading defies competition. His recommendation of complete separation is wrong for all the reasons I have already mentioned. This system would contain a specially trained developmental staff and administrative head, but they would be integrated within, and in constant communication with, the rest of the college.

The future of the community colleges will be shaped by how effectively their English departments educate the developmental students. To separate the developmental program is wrong. Certainly, developmental education must be a primary goal of the community college, but the college must function as an organic whole to meet these needs and others. Freshman English must not separate students, but unite them in a non-punitive, non-competitive situation. It must meet the developmental student's special needs while challenging him to apply what he learns in a meaningful environment--not a "remedial" environment. The college must function as a whole, with all its parts integrated, and implore all students to do the same.

Notes

[1]W. Ro Winterowd, "The Humanist and Public Rhetoric" (Paper presented to the SAMLA Annual Meeting, Atlanta, Saturday, November 8, 1975).

[2]Time (November 10, 1975), p. 15.

[3]Thomas J. Farrell, "Reading in the Community College," College English, 37:1 (September, 1974).

[4]"Teen Writing Skill on Decline," Gainesville Sun (November 17, 1975).

[5]William Moore, Jr., Blind Man on a Freeway (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass. 1971), p. 93.

[6]William Moore, Jr., Against the Odds (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1970), p. ix.

[7]John E. Roueche, Salvage, Redirection, or Custody? (American Association of Junior Colleges, Washington, D. C., 1968), p. 13.

[8]Terry O'Banion, Teachers for Tomorrow (Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1972), pp. 93-94.

[9]Roueche, Salvage, p. 2.

[10]James W. Thornton, The Community Junior College, 2nd Ed., (New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1966), p. 33.

[11]Ibid., p. 35.

[12]Roueche, A Modest Proposal: Students Can Learn (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1972), p. 10.

[13]Moore, Against the Odds, p. 222.

[14]Ibid., Introduction.

[15]Roueche, A Modest Proposal, p. 7-8.

[16]Gretchen Nadeen Vik, Developmental Composition in College (Unpulished Dissertation, The University of Florida, Gainesville, 1975), pp. 183-197.

[17]Moore, Blind Man, p. 92.

[18]Moore, Against the Odds, pp. 181-195.

[19]Vik, pp. 183-197

[20]Roueche, A Modest Proposal, pp. 73-74.

[21]Roueche, Catching Up: Remedial Education (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1973), p. 83.

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Winterowd, W. Ross, "Rhetoric and the General Public," paper delivered at the forty-fifty convention of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association, Atlanta, Nov. 7, 1975.

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